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# Honoring Black Ball Players — The Tortuous Road to Cooperstown

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The issue of whether the admission of a few Negro League players to the baseball Hall of Fame is belated justice or mere tokenism is one of great significance. Given the popular conception that Hall of Fame admission is the dominant distinction in the game, the historical evaluation of the Negro Leagues hangs in the balance. Should the Negro Leagues be a footnote in baseball history, a place where a few worthy players toiled in obscurity because the nation was indeed segregated? Or were the Negro Leagues much more; were the Negro Leagues filled with baseball's greatest athletes during perhaps baseball's greatest period?

The most useful source of Negro League information is oral testimony. Sport historians must be farsighted enough to use this oral record accurately and intelligently. From hundreds of hours of collected interviews something approaching a Negro League consensus emerges.

Among those living in 1980 shortstop Willie Wells and third baseman Ray Dandridge emerge as the men with the highest reputations. Wells' career began in the mid-twenties and extended until the 1950's, but his greatest years were in the late twenties and throughout the thirties. Many Negro Leaguers credit Wells with being the first player to wear a batting helmet, and the first infielder to play the batter differently depending on style, pitcher stamina, and pitch selection. Dandridge broke into Negro Baseball in 1933 and was an East-West Classic player by 1935. He was probably the most famous American black in the Caribbean, and when integration of baseball finally came, a decade too late for him, he led the American Association in batting at the age of 41.

Even greater players, according to former Negro Leaguers, have already "passed." To Negro League players of the twenties and thirties Bullet Rogan of the Kansas City Monarchs and Smokey Joe Williams of the Homestead Greys were superior to Satchel Paige. While no Negro League player denigrates Paige, most assert that Rogan and Williams were at least his equal. Other pitchers consistently mentioned by the Negro League players include Hilton Smith, Leon Day, Raymond Brown, and Dick Redding.

A considerable percentage of individuals are admitted to the Baseball Hall of Fame for reasons other than ballplaying. By any criterion Andrew Rube Foster, pitcher, promoter, founder of the Negro League, belongs in the Hall of Fame. Effa Manley, co-owner of the Newark Eagles and the driving force behind much of the success of the second Negro National League, deserves some consideration, too.

Perhaps the most important document in fairly evaluating the Negro Leaguer's claim for Hall of Fame admission is the "List of 25". Satchel Paige, Buck Leonard, Judy Johnson, Cool Papa Bell, and Monte Irvin prepared a list of the twenty-five players they thought should be added to the Hall of Fame. Historians must not let this document disappear.

There are many baseball players of America's segregated past who will never be fairly evaluated because those who saw them in their prime are now dead. But there is a surprisingly rich accumulation of oral histories of black baseball. Sport historians must learn how to use this material.



The dances performed by Harley Crowchild's group from the Sarcee reservation were a once in a lifetime experience for many NASSHites.